

الجزيرة

24-10-2017

In “Butcher’s” killing, a reminder for Syria’s Druze

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The death of prominent Druze general Issam Zahreddine should remind the community Assad is not their savior, argues Makram Rabah.

“A boy of nine years will not die at ten.” So goes the common Druze phrase used to underscore their people’s fatalism and approach to matters of mortality. Yet, for the Druze, a heterodox sect of Islam with adherents numbering fewer than a million scattered throughout the Levant, survival over the centuries has always depended on their earthly leadership’s ability to forecast the consequences of their political actions and alliances.

The outbreak of the Syrian revolution pressed the Druze to reach deep into their bag of survival tricks to ascertain that their involvement, or neutrality, ultimately protected their long-term strategic interests and, more importantly, their existence. Traditionally, the Druze of Syria, like other minority groups, have supported the ruling Baath regime; first under Hafez al-Assad and later under his equally brutal but less charismatic son, Bashar. This soon changed after 2011, however, as many dissident Druze voices condemned their community’s blind support of the regime, calling on their coreligionists in Assad’s army not to partake in the repressive military campaign, which portrayed the Druze of Syria as mere brutal executioners.

This image was further bolstered by the notorious figure of Issam Zahreddine, a Druze major general who commanded the predominantly Druze 104th Brigade of the Republican Guard, accused of committing numerous massacres against civilians and opposition militants alike, earning him the name “the Butcher.” Zahreddine’s overzealous mindset took him as far as to parade the mutilated remains of his foes on his social media pages, as well as to issue his infamous **threat** to Syria’s millions of refugees not to return, warning them that, “even if the government forgives you, we will never forgive or forget.”

In an act of poetic justice, just one month after that spiteful statement, Zahreddine was killed, when, according to Syrian government sources, his vehicle hit an ISIS landmine in Deir al-Zor. This version of events was contested, however, by a number of sources which alleged he was in fact killed during a firefight between himself and other members of the Republican Guard sent to arrest him after he had refused a direct order from his superior, Brig. Gen. Wafiq Shehade. Yet this conspiratorial **tale** of Zahreddine's demise does not get to the heart of the controversy surrounding the life and death of this bloodthirsty individual, who was used by the Assad regime as a totem pole to uphold a number of myths.

On the surface, while the Baath regime peddles secularism and an antiquated Arab nationalist rhetoric, in reality it pursues a sectarian caste system which empowers and rewards religious groups for services rendered. Consequently, for Assad these groups are pivotal to assert his legitimacy and ostensible role as protector of the minorities against an imagined hegemonic Sunni majority bent on destroying the diversity of Syria. Zahreddine was merely one pawn in this game, who, prior to the revolution, was a junior officer in a has-been Cold War-era army, whose sole accomplishment was to occupy neighboring Lebanon and establish a racketeering network of which any organized crime syndicate would be proud.

Just like other officers who wear their sectarian identity on their sleeve, Zahreddine maintained the illusion that his sect or tribe fully condoned his brutality, which, in this narrative, was merely the legitimate use of force by a servant of the state. That red herring, however, is easily exposed by several conspicuous features of his funeral.

First, the number of Druze in al-Suwayda, Zahreddine's home province, who flocked to the municipal football stadium to honor this so-called fallen hero, who protected his community and the nation from harm, was meager compared to the majority of the Druze who boycotted the funeral.

Second, and more importantly, despite the supposed gravitas of the occasion, Bashar al-Assad did not make the trip in person to lay his general to rest, but rather delegated Mansour Azzam, his Minister of Presidential Affairs. Azzam, a native of al-Suwayda, is an inconsequential member of Assad's inner circle whose glorified title has been shown by [WikiLeaks](#) to mask the reality that he is little but a gofer to the Assad family, following up on Asma al-Assad's elaborate European shopping needs and other similarly pressing matters.

Crucially, the majority of Druze outside Syria, particularly those across the border in Lebanon, have always denounced Zahreddine's savagery, and thus naturally refrained from mourning his death, in contrast to the widespread grief and reverence displayed after the 2015 assassination of the Druze cleric Sheikh [Wahid Bal'ous](#). Bal'ous, whose Rijal al-Karama ("Men of Dignity") movement was anathema to Zahreddine and the pro-Assad Druze, paid with his life for reminding his Druze brethren that the only way to protect themselves was to assume a defensive stance and avoid spilling the blood of their Syrian countrymen.

To conform to Druze faith and tradition, a person born of Druze parents is obliged to uphold a number of socio-religious practices, chiefly but not exclusively the

“protection of and mutual aid to the brethren in faith.” This aid can come in both active and passive form, but certainly not in the form of the acts of men like Zahreddine, which place the Druze and the whole of Syria in harm’s way.

This applies equally to all other Syrian communities, large or small, who need to realize that men such as Zahreddine and his Sarin-gassing master can neither protect nor build a modern state, as the only way towards such a goal is to rebuke the spilling of innocent blood even if it comes under the pretext of fighting terrorism.